



CDC's Technical Assistance & Service Improvement Initiative: Summary of Assessment

Introduction

In 2011, CDC's Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS) established the cross-agency Technical Assistance and Service Improvement Initiative (TASII) to address recommendations from the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and the State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial (STLT) Workgroup to the Advisory Committee to CDC's Director for improving technical assistance given to grantees by CDC project officers.

TASII works to develop and strengthen systems, strategies, tools, policies, and practices to help project officers provide accurate, timely, and consistent technical assistance to colleagues in the field.

Overview and Methods

In August—October 2012, TASII conducted an assessment using three surveys to determine the quality of technical assistance and customer support provided to grantees of CDC-funded cooperative agreement grantees across all centers, institutes, and offices (CIOs). The primary purposes of the assessment were to

- Assess grantees' satisfaction with the types and quality of technical assistance provided
- Identify training priorities to inform the development of training programs for CDC staff who administer cooperative agreements and grants
- Describe CDC programs' various technical assistance models

The target audience for this assessment included

- Domestic STLT grantees receiving CDC funding to implement non-research prevention or control programs
- Project officers assigned to implement and manage CDC cooperative agreements and grants
- Supervisors of project officers assigned to implement and manage CDC cooperative agreement and grants



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Surveys were administered during August–October 2012. Response rates to the survey request were acceptable and included

- 795 grantees completed the TASII External Stakeholder Survey (OMB# 0920-0879) (response rate = 69%)
- 196 CDC project officers completed the TASII Project Officer Survey (response rate = 59%)
- 72 CDC supervisors of project officers completed the TASII Leadership Survey (response rate = 48%)

Because the surveys were developed and administered in the spirit of learning and continuous performance improvement, survey results will inform current and future TASII priorities and activities. They will also aid in program-specific efforts to support project officers and improve customer service to CDC-funded grantees.

Results

Overall Grantee Satisfaction

Grantees reported high satisfaction with their project officers' technical assistance. Eighty-seven percent of grantees indicated that the technical assistance usually or always met their needs. More than 90% of grantees indicated high levels of satisfaction with the accuracy and utility of information from their project officers and their project officers' responsiveness to emails and phone calls.

Funding Opportunity Announcements & Program Announcements

Clarity. The majority of grantees (88%), project officers (72%), and their supervisors (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that the program announcements clearly defined program goals and scope of activities.

Consistency. Seventy-eight percent of grantees and supervisors agreed or strongly agreed that the program announcements' goals and expectations were consistent throughout the performance period.

Award Oversight. Seventy percent of project officers indicated that the funding opportunity announcements they managed supported effective oversight of cooperative agreement awards. In addition, 79% of project officers indicated that their immediate supervisor provided adequate support and expertise for the programs they administered.

Grants Management and Program Monitoring

Reporting Requirements. Grantees were satisfied or extremely satisfied with reporting requirements and project officer monitoring activities, including

- Clarity of the progress reporting requirements (81%)
- Feasibility of data collection and progress reporting, as well as with the type and frequency of feedback received (77%)
- Utility of the information collected (72%)
- Burden level of the data collection and progress reporting requirements (71%)

Site Visits and Conference Calls. Eighty percent of grantees indicated that the number of onsite visits conducted with their project officers was sufficient to meet their needs. Likewise, 87% indicated that the number of conference calls was sufficient. More grantees reported satisfaction with the usefulness of conference calls (81%) than onsite visits (56%).

Characteristics of the CDC Project Officer Workforce

Job Satisfaction. Project officers reported slight satisfaction with their current position (mean = 3.5 on a 5 point scale) and neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their current workload (mean = 3.1 on a 5 point scale).

Retention and Turnover of Project Officers. Forty-nine percent of grantees were assigned two or more project officers within a given performance period. Among these grantees, 56% reported a negative impact, 27% reported no impact, and 17% reported a positive impact associated with project officer turnover or reassignment. Over half of supervisors (54%) agreed that the frequency of project officer turnover had a negative impact and interfered with program management, operations, and technical assistance delivery.

Interpersonal Skills and Professionalism. Grantees indicated high levels of satisfaction with their project officers' interpersonal skills and professionalism. The vast majority of grantees agreed or strongly agreed that their project officer demonstrated

- Respect for them and their organization (93%)
- Integrity and ethical standards (91%)
- A collaborative approach when working with them and others in the program (91%)
- Political acumen, tact, and diplomacy (88%)

Technical Competency. Grantees validated a set of 34 project officer competencies associated with the following six domains:

1. Program management and improvement
2. Program planning and development
3. Public health applied sciences and knowledge
4. Organizational consultation
5. Grants administration and management
6. Communication

More than 87% of grantees reported that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with project officers' performance on these competencies. However, 50% of supervisors indicated that most or all of their project officers would benefit from training or skill development on select competencies.

Conclusions

The results of this assessment were overwhelmingly positive. Potential areas for agency-wide improvement are limited to project officer turnover, workload, and to a lesser extent, job satisfaction. Although grantees reported satisfaction with project officers' competence, individual CIOs can explore project officer training needs expressed by their respective supervisors.

Preliminary results from the assessment were shared with ASTHO's senior deputies in January 2013. Final results from the assessment were shared with CDC leadership, the TASH Workgroup, and project officers.

OSTLTS thanks all survey respondents and stakeholders for their participation in planning and conducting the TASH Assessment. Please email questions and comments about the assessment to tashsurvey@cdc.gov.